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ABSTRACT

After a brief literature review, this paper examines the problem of defining literacy. It emphasizes the importance of using a flexible definition based on learners' needs and goals in social contexts in determining the goals of literacy instruction. In order to illustrate the wide variation in not only students' levels of English-language proficiency but also in their experience with literacy, different types of learners who may attend adult English literacy programs are described. An overview is provided of the types of programs available to immigrants in the United States, as well as some of the obstacles that may discourage adults from participating in these programs. Finally, the paper discusses a number of learner-centered approaches to English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) literacy instruction that have been used for helping limited English proficient adults acquire skills that will empower them socially, politically, educationally, and economically. It is concluded that literacy educators must continue to investigate and use approaches that utilize teacher/learner collaboration. (Contains 30 references.) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education) (LB)

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Adult ESL Literacy Education in the United States: Developing a Learner-Centered Approach

by

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Introduction

Illiteracy complicates the lives of many limited English proficient (LEP) adults when living in highly literate contexts, such as the U.S.. North American society operates on the premise that most of its members can read and write. Many adult immigrants and refugees to the U.S., however, cannot read or write. Immigrants and refugees may be monolingual speakers of their native languages who are literate in the native language, but lack proficiency in English. In other cases, immigrants may be speakers of a language which lacks a written code, and so they may not have needed to know how to read or write until coming to the United States. Others may never have had the opportunity to develop literacy or strong language skills in either the native language or English. Some have never attended school, or have only attained a very minimal level of basic education in their home countries. Some nonnative-speaking adults who have been in the U.S. for some time still lack literacy skills in English due to shortcomings of U.S. public schools, which have concentrated primarily on oral English skills and have neglected to adequately teach reading and writing (Garza & Orum, 1982).

For members of the U.S. immigrant and refugee population, a lack of literacy skills, in addition to a limited command of spoken English, can create numerous difficulties and may limit their participation in many areas of society. A study done by the U.S. Census Bureau in 1982 reported the illiteracy rate to be 9% for adults whose native language is English and 48% for those whose native language is not English (Haverson, 1986). The survey identified various factors as potential risks contributing to illiteracy, including education, immigration status, lack of English proficiency, race, age, and poverty. This creates a cycle: while factors such as poverty, and a lack of English skills and basic education contribute to higher levels of illiteracy, illiteracy hampers individuals' ability to escape the marginal existence of many LEP people in the U.S. and to determine the direction of their own lives.

Since literacy is a very complicated and controversial issue, this paper will first examine the problem of defining literacy and will emphasize the importance of utilizing a flexible definition of literacy based on learners' needs and goals in social contexts in determining the goals of literacy

instruction. The second section of the paper will describe different types of learners who may attend adult English literacy programs so as to illustrate the wide variation in not only students' levels of English-language proficiency but also in their experience with literacy. This section will also provide an overview of the types of programs that are available to immigrants in the U.S. as well as some of the obstacles that may discourage adults from participating in these programs. Finally, a number of learner-centered approaches that have been taken to English as a second language (ESL) literacy instruction as means by which LEP adults may be enabled to acquire skills that may empower them socially, politically, educationally, and economically will be discussed.

Defining Literacy

For a long time, literacy was defined according to the number of grade levels in school that a student had completed (Cook, 1977). More recent definitions have focused on adults' need to function within a specific social context (Cervero, 1985). From this point of view, "literacy is not something that can be measured in an absolute sense, such as body weight, but rather

in a relative sense" (p. 50). UNESCO followed similar logic in the adoption of its definition of illiteracy in 1978, which reads: "A person is functionally illiterate who cannot engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his group and community and also for enabling him to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his own and the community's development" (Lestage, 1982, p. 5).

While definitions that focus on learners' needs, and frequently those of the larger community as well, represent the current view of many teachers and researchers who are concerned with literacy-related issues regarding the purpose of literacy instruction, there are others who would like to settle on a common definition of literacy. Such a floating, relative definition of illiteracy as that adopted by UNESCO may not be specific enough to guide the efforts of those charged with specifying goals, content and evaluation guidelines for literacy programs. However, because of the pluralism of American values, we can't assume that there exists a set of values that is shared by all people. People in different contexts have different

values, and so effective functioning in each context requires different skills. As a result, the definition of literacy within a given context would have to be dependent on the values of those who choose to define it.

While the larger society may consider a person who cannot read or write as one unable to function effectively in society, Fingeret (1983) found that "many illiterate adults see themselves as interdependent; they contribute a range of skills and knowledge other than reading and writing to their networks" (pp. 133-134). Fingeret suggests that we think of nonreading adults as members of primarily oral subcultures, rather than as "nonfunctioning members of the dominant literate culture" (Fingeret, 1989, p. 11). She states that members of oral subcultures value spending time with others, sharing information, and providing mutual assistance. Nonreading adults may, for example, offer help with child care or assistance in fixing a car in return for help with reading and writing tasks. Through this mutually beneficial exchange, many illiterate adults see themselves as contributing members of their communities. From this

perspective, the development of literacy skills, even for one learner, can be seen as part of a larger social process.

While certain groups would be served by agreement upon a common definition of literacy, such as federal and state governments, textbook companies, and standardized test producers, a common definition might limit the options available to learners. In the best interest of these learners, it may be best to promote a flexible definition of literacy, the specifics of which should be determined by the learners themselves, together with educators who have elected to assist them in reaching their goals, and according to needs present within their social contexts. Otherwise, it is questionable as to whose interests are being served (Cervero, 1985).

The Learners, The Opportunities, and The Obstacles

The Learners

There are many types of LEP adults enrolled in literacy education programs in the U.S. who choose to acquire literacy for any number of reasons, among them the need to conduct business, to help children with their education, to get a GED certificate, to become a

citizen or a permanent resident, or to acquire a better job. According to Haverson and Haynes (1982), literacy learners can be grouped into four major categories: a) nonliterate; b) preliterate; c) semiliterate; or d) literate in a non-Roman alphabet. According to this categorization, a person who speaks a language that has a written form but cannot read or write it would be classified as nonliterate. A preliterate person is one who speaks a language for which there exists no written form. In other words, those who exist in a context where there are no written words cannot be said to lack literacy. The need of preliterates for literacy arises from a change in their need for literacy, either through an increase in the need for literacy in the environment in which they live or through relocation to a region in which the possession of literacy skills is an expectation for most residents. Semiliterates are learners who frequently have had minimal formal education and may possess limited literacy skills in the native language or additional languages. Finally, those who are literate in a non-Roman alphabet, such as Chinese, Lao, Arabic, etc., can read and write in their own language, but in order to achieve literacy in both

languages must learn a new set of symbols and possibly new sounds as well.

Of course LEP adult learners differ not only with regard to their experience with literacy, but also with regard to the types of classroom settings to which they have been exposed, if any. Also, there exist differences in the functions and uses of oral and written language in the learners' native-language cultures which may act in shaping learners' perceptions about their need for literacy in a second language, and may influence how the learning of second-language literacy is approached. In view of these differences, it becomes clear that addressing the various needs of such a diverse population is a challenging task which requires careful investigation of the cultural backgrounds and native-language abilities of learners as well as the demands that they are likely to encounter in the various types of interactions in which they will take part in U.S. society (Isserlis, 1990; Weinstein, 1984).

Opportunities For Literacy Instruction

For LEP adults living in the U.S., most ESL and literacy instruction takes place through local adult

basic education (ABE) programs, which can be found in settings such as public schools, community colleges, vocational/technical schools, and adult education centers. Other programs, funded primarily through refugee resettlement funds, may be operated by social service agencies, churches, and other community organizations. In addition, since the passage in 1986 of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), which established procedures by which undocumented immigrants who had lived in the U.S. continuously since before January 1, 1982 could become legal residents of the U.S., a number of public and private institutions have been funded under the State Legalization Impact Assistance Grants (SLIAG) program to offer courses to adults seeking to fulfill the educational requirements of the amnesty program. Programs such as those discussed here might include ESL, ABE, General Educational Development (GED) and parenting classes. In addition, consumer-oriented courses, such as tax preparation, are sometimes offered (Terdy & Spener, 1990).

Some adult education programs, particularly those located in areas with large language minority

communities (New York City and Los Angeles, for example) offer native language literacy instruction. The goal of most of these programs is bilingualism and biliteracy. Some require students to develop basic literacy skills in their native language before enrolling in ESL classes. In other programs, ESL and native language classes are taken at the same time, the ESL classes focusing on oral/aural proficiency while reading/writing skills are developed in the native language. Another option is to offer bilingual literacy classes, where students develop reading and writing skills simultaneously in their native language and English (Rivera, 1990).

Most adult education for language minority groups in the U.S., however, focuses on ESL, with little or no development of native language skills, though research evidence has indicated that skills and knowledge learned in the first language transfer to English (e.g. Cummins, 1983, 1986), and that when adults are taught to read in the language that they already know, the knowledge and skills they have acquired in the first language may facilitate the learning of reading in the second language (Rivera, 1988). Some programs

are not able to offer native language literacy instruction for a number of reasons. One such reason is that classes may be composed of students who speak a number of native languages, making it economically difficult to offer literacy classes in each language. Other problems may include a shortage of native language teaching and reading materials. Since many languages lack written forms, print materials for instruction in those languages are, for the most part, unavailable. Also, it is frequently difficult or impossible to find trained teachers who can read, write, and speak students' native languages.

Dealing With Obstacles to Participation

According to the 1982 English Language Proficiency Study, of the 17-20 million functionally illiterate adults in the U.S., an estimated 7 million spoke a language other than English in the home. However, a survey of LEP student enrollment estimated that in 1986-87 only about 900,000 of these LEP adults were enrolled in adult education programs (National Clearinghouse on Literacy Education, 1991). With the proliferation of literacy programs in the U.S., questions arise as to why the participation of LEP

adults in these programs should be so low. One explanation is the high attrition rate in all U.S. adult education programs. LEP adults, like all adult learners, share a number of difficulties such as problems related to child care, poverty, health, age, low self-esteem, work, schedule, and transportation. LEP students' problems, however, are compounded by limited knowledge of the language and the culture of the environment (Brod, 1990).

To encourage students to attend classes, and to aid retention of students in the programs, programs need to offer flexible class schedules and fund, or provide access to, support services such as child-care, health care, transportation and counseling. In addition to these external factors, attention should be given to appropriate placement of students in classes, so that students will be neither bored nor discouraged by instruction at too high or too low a level. For example, the placement of literates and preliterates in the same class may result in much time being devoted to the preliterate students while little attention may be devoted to the needs of the literates. In addition, proper placement will help ensure that students make

progress towards their goals that is sufficient to encourage them to continue to participate in classes. Again, it is imperative that classroom instruction as well as instructional materials be appropriate to the needs and interests of the learners. Materials should neither be too difficult or too simplistic for learners nor should they lack relevance to learners' lives and the goals which they seek to attain (Brod, 1990).

Approaches to Literacy Instruction

Literacy instruction in the U.S. has traditionally been seen as a way of socializing students into a number of roles in mainstream society (Fingeret, 1989). While the focus of literacy education has changed periodically to reflect changes in political and social conditions in the U.S., the purposes and standards of literacy, and the contents of the curriculum have been consistently determined by "experts," students being perceived as the "objects" of instruction. The norms of the white, middle-class have provided the framework upon which the goals of many of these programs have been built, goals that have included not only the teaching of literacy skills but the changing of students' attitudes and cultures as well. Fingeret

states that, during the 1960's and 1970's, educators involved in adult basic education embraced the prevailing social science view that nonreading adults could be seen as "living in a state of psychological and economic poverty; they were seen as lacking the qualities of character as well as the skills necessary for social mobility or economic stability" (p. 7). When competency-based literacy education emerged in the 1970's, it seemed that students might finally be involved in defining the competencies that they wanted to achieve. However, even today, most competency-based programs judge students' skills by pre-determined list of skills which tend to reflect the goals that those in power have deemed appropriate for them. The following approaches to literacy instruction represent alternatives to traditional approaches, which have tended to be more teacher-centered. As a result, the importance of considering participants' reality in establishing goals and selecting materials and of involving learners in the educational planning process has not received adequate recognition. In the following discussion, the terms "teacher," "instructor," "educator," and "facilitator" will be

used interchangeably to refer to persons in the facilitator role.

The Language Experience/Whole Language Approaches

The language experience approach (LEA) to the teaching of reading is hardly a recent innovation. Forms of LEA have been considered basic recommended reading methodology and have been used in the U.S. for many years in mainstream educational settings (Stauffer, 1980). While LEA is not the name of a specific methodology and is practiced in many forms, LEA lessons usually proceed according to the following steps. The first step in the process involves a stimulus, an experience. The experience can be something created by the teacher and learners together or students' remembered experience. The teacher and students discuss the experience, thus generating vocabulary and ideas to be included in the written version. Students then dictate the story to the teacher, who records what is said, thus constructing the basic reading text. Students read the story many times until it is familiar. Since the story was generated by the learners, motivation to read it is high, and comprehension is almost guaranteed. Through

the frequent discussion and reading of self-generated texts, learners acquire oral language and learn to recognize their words in print. In most cases, individual story words are later reinforced through other activities designed by the teacher. When students have gained confidence and skill in the reading of their own dictations, they then move on to reading texts written by other authors, such as texts produced by their classmates as well as commercially published materials (Dixon & Nessel, 1983).

More recently, the term "whole language" has been used to refer to holistic practices in the teaching of reading and writing. Like LEA, the term "whole language" doesn't name a specific methodology but a paradigm that can be used in the development and evaluation of teaching methods. A basic tenet of both LEA and whole language is that literacy instruction should involve the integration of reading and writing activities centered on language and experiential backgrounds of learners, and that facility in language is acquired and refined through use (Altwerger, Edelsky, & Flores, 1987; Goodman, 1986; Newman, 1985).

Holistic approaches, such as LEA and whole language, offer a number of advantages for ESL learners. One advantage is that reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills are integrated. Learning to read and write becomes an extension of the language learning process. Also, because the topics for discussion and the generation of texts are taken from learners' experiences, both oral language skills and literacy skills may be learned in a more meaningful context, which may motivate students and reinforce self-esteem. Finally, since LEA and whole language are extremely flexible approaches, both can be modified in a number of ways to accommodate learners' individual needs.

While the use of LEA or whole language approaches in the teaching of ESL literacy may be extremely rewarding, they are also very time-consuming. Since the use of these approaches requires an incredible amount of individualized planning and instruction, they place a great deal of responsibility on the teacher for the management of the program. Also, approaches such as LEA and whole language have been criticized for their lack of vocabulary control or graded skill

development (Thonis, 1970). Nevertheless, even when using a holistic approach, efforts can be taken to structure lessons in such a way as to reinforce vocabulary and reading skills. While many whole-language teachers admit that they find the approach more taxing on their creativity and time, they also stress that the use of whole language rewards their sense of professionalism in that "whole language requires teachers to make decisions" (O'Neil, 1989, p. 7).

Participatory Literacy Education

Another interesting approach to literacy, which has been referred to as a variant of whole language (Spener, 1990), involves a curriculum development process that is "participatory and is based on a collaborative investigation of critical issues in family or community life" (Auerbach, 1989, p. 177). Brazilian educator Paolo Freire, who is credited with the development of the participatory approach to adult literacy education, sees literacy education as a vehicle for social change. According to Freire, since unjust social conditions are the cause of illiteracy, basic education is necessary for learners to free

themselves from the conditions that oppress them (Spener, 1990).

At the heart of participatory literacy education is the notion that education is a highly political act, and that it has traditionally been designed to meet the needs of those in power. Literacy programs have been used as means of transmitting or reproducing the dominant culture and of providing workers whose skills may serve the needs of the dominant culture (Auerbach, 1989; Freire, 1985; Handel and Goldsmith, 1989). The positions of students in dominant and subordinant classes have been reinforced, thus maintaining a "culture of silence" (Freire, 1985, p. 50) among those in subordinate classes. While traditionally educators have been viewed as possessors of knowledge who "fill" the heads of their learners with their words, Freire takes the view that all individuals can be seen as intellectuals since we have all participated in the conception of history, of the world. Literacy, from this point of view, is a way in which both learners and teachers develop their way of thinking about reality.

Freire's approach provides guiding principles which those involved in participatory literacy can use

to guide and evaluate their efforts. He emphasizes the importance of investigating the cultural contexts of the learners in order to collect "generative words" (Freire, 1985, p. 12). The collecting of generative words involves the identification of vocabulary which reflect meaningful themes in learners' lives. The generative words are should then be used as the basis for texts which will reflect the sociocultural point of view of the learners. Another use of the generative words is in the preparation of "discovery cards" (Spener, 1990, p. 2) in which each generative word is separated into component syllables. Learners use the cards to form other words by recombining the syllables. Freire also stresses the importance of using the generative words in realistic problem situations, such that learners are challenged to analyze and find answers for problematic situations that they encounter in their own lives. The issues that learners choose to focus on become the basis for their own content-based literacy curriculum.

Practitioners of participatory literacy in ESL contexts in the U.S. have questioned Freire's syllabary method in teaching work-attack skills. Since English

is much less phonetically and orthographically regular than Spanish or Portuguese, the languages of instruction in Freire's Latin American programs, there has been a shift in ESL participatory literacy programs towards the use of whole-word and text-focused methods. Other programs have discontinued the use of generative words altogether, preferring to use language experience and whole language techniques developed for use with English. Participatory ESL literacy programs in the U.S. have, however, retained the two most distinctive features of the Freirean approach, that of the generation of texts through authentic dialogue between equally knowing learners and educators, and the posing of problems related to issues in participants' lives (Spener, 1990).

Family and Intergenerational Literacy Programs

Family and intergenerational literacy approaches to literacy share many of the same characteristics as the approaches previously discussed. Both "Family literacy" and "intergenerational literacy" are terms used to refer to approaches which stress the importance of cross-generational interaction between learners.

In the following discussion, only the term "family literacy" will be used.

Family literacy program models vary according to their goals. One goal of family literacy is to promote intergenerational transfer of literacy skills. Another goal of is for parents and children to become learners together in such a way that ideas and values of home and school can become integrated (Murphy, Viola, Love, & Martin, 1989). Some programs, unfortunately, take a kind of behavior modification approach to teach parents to imitate such behaviors that occur in the homes of "successful" readers. Several programs established with Even Start funding have been developed according to rather prescriptive goals such as "to 'give' parents of three and four year old children the knowledge, motivation, skill, and resources necessary to help their children" (Isserlis, 1990, p. 5). More innovative programs have attempted to design activities and curricula based on the specific needs of their participants. It has been noted that, whatever the approach, the most successful programs are those which make acknowledgement and exploration of both American

and native cultural values and practices an integral part of the curriculum (Weinstein-Shr, 1990).

For most of these programs, "family" is loosely defined. Not only parents are encouraged to participate, but also grandparents or primary caregivers. Most family literacy programs, like many adult education programs, provide literacy and parenting education for adults; however, programming for adults is generally coordinated with programming for children in order to provide parents with opportunities for systematic parent/child interaction involving literacy activities. A number of family literacy programs have been established and include a wide range of program models, many of which are supported by federal funding through Title VII and money allocated as a reusult of the passage of the Even Start legislation and the Family Support Act of 1988. The Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy, private corporations, and others are additionally responsible for funding family literacy programs (Isserlis, 1990).

The Navajo Parent Child Reading Program (NPCR), initiated in 1985 at Chinle Primary School on the

Navajo reservation, is an example of an innovative family literacy program. The designers of NCPR began with specific objectives, which were to "empower Navajo parents by involving them in their children's literacy development and, within the context of pleasurable reading experiences at school and at home" (Murphy, Viola, Love, & Martin, 1989, p. 2). To reinforce Navajo culture as well as build home and school links parents, grandparents, teachers and children work together to generate and share texts based on traditional Navajo stories. Since emphasis is placed on the comprehension of story ideas, and not the actual decoding of print, parents and children can enjoy the stories together, regardless of the language used for the sharing or whether either the parent or the child can actually read the print on the pages.

Whereas most family literacy programs target both adults and children both as direct beneficiaries of instruction, some programs are more adult-oriented and focus on building instruction around community and family issues. The University of Massachusetts Family Literacy Project (UMass Project) has utilized a participatory approach to literacy which has involved

learners in investigating issues of immediate concern to their lives, such as daycare, housing problems, and AIDS. Students participating in the UMass Project have utilized their developing reading and writing skills to take an active role in addressing what they perceive as problems for themselves and their families. This activism has involved writing letters to the editor, writing and presenting testimony for state funding hearings, and writing articles and letters addressing concerns about their children's schooling (Auerbach, 1989).

Conclusion

The approaches to adult ESL literacy instruction that have been described here present alternatives that are available to those challenged with helping LEP adults achieve their literacy goals. Language experience, whole language, participatory literacy, and family/intergenerational literacy approaches offer advantages over traditional approaches in that not only are learners' experiences and values incorporated as part of literacy instruction but also that learners are more actively involved in determining the direction of their instruction according to their own goals.

There is considerable overlap among these approaches to literacy education, and for each approach to be effective, a key element is the identification of learner needs. Adult ESL/literacy learners have little time to waste; therefore, teachers/facilitators must be adept at helping learners to quickly identify their learning objectives (Anderson, 1988). Participants may have difficulty articulating what they need or want to learn. Because of low self-esteem, a lack of self-confidence, or as a result of having occupied a marginalized position in society, learners may enter the learning activity with preconceived ideas regarding classroom roles of teachers and students. In addition, because of the tendency to act on culturally-based assumptions that differ from the learners' reality, learning facilitators may have difficulty understanding what learners really want. Since any of these factors may create problems in the design or implementation of a learner-based literacy program, it is vital that literacy facilitators take steps to familiarize themselves with the contexts of the participants' lives outside the literacy classroom, both through dialogue with participants themselves and by spending time

actually visiting and analyzing those contexts. By gaining an awareness of participants' social, economic, political, and cultural environment, facilitators may be better able to hear what is often difficult for learners to articulate and may more effectively help learners meet the expectations that they have for their learning.

All individuals living in the U.S. need to have access to literacy instruction. An inability to interact with print sources limits individuals' ability to determine the direction of their own lives and that of the society in which they live and participate. Obviously this opportunity needs to be made available to all, regardless of language background. For those involved in the work of promoting literacy, it is important to remember that literacy, like spoken language, is used in specific social contexts. Any definition of literacy must, therefore, take into account the social setting in which the literacy is to be used. Literacy educators must also be reminded that the LEP adults who enroll in ESL literacy programs are a heterogenous groups of persons with a range of personality characteristics, skills, knowledge, and

aspirations that must be investigated and considered when designing instructional programs for their use. Furthermore, programs that provide literacy instruction must work to deal with the numerous obstacles to participation that stand in the way of many LEP adult learners. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, literacy educators must continue to investigate, utilize, and promote approaches that utilize yteacher/learner collaboration in order to achieve individual and common goals. Through this sharing of power, mutual learning may be facilitated through cross-cultural communication and the value of both teachers and learners as knowledgeable individuals, equally worthy of respect, is acknowledged.

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